SALEM WITCHCRAFT.

THERE are few portions of either ancient or modern history which exhibit stranger or more tragical and affecting scenes than that known by the title of Salem Witchcraft, and few occurrences that are matter of authentic history remain so deeply shrouded in mystery at the present day. This delusion, notwithstanding the intense curiosity it has always excited, has never yet been satisfactorily explained; time has rather obscured than thrown light upon the subject, and a prominent place may be assigned to it among that large class of historical facts, for which succeeding generations find it impossible to account. That it was attended by fraud and imposture, and that the people labored under a frenzy in their treatment of it, admits of no doubt. But it was not all fraud and imposture, and there were certain phenomena exhibited during its career which it is impossible to explain upon any principles of natural philosophy which were known to that age or the present.

The belief in witchcraft at that time was general throughout Christendom, and the existence and criminality of the practice were recognized in the penal code of every state. Persons suspected of being witches and wizards, were tried, condemned and put to death by the authority of the most enlightened tribunals in Europe. Only a few years before the

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occurrences in New England, Sir Matthew Hale, a judge highly and justly renowned for the strength of his understanding, the variety of his knowledge, and the eminent Christian graces which adorned his character, had, after a long and anxious investigation, adjudged a number of men and women to die for this offence. The reality of witchcraft had never yet been questioned, nor were there any persons to whom that reality appeared unimportant or incredible, except those who regarded the spiritual world as altogether a mere speculation, vague, visionary and delusive. Among other believers in the practice, were some of the accused themselves who suffered for the crime. Instigated by fraud, folly or cruelty, or possessed by demoniacal frenzy, some of these unhappy beings professed, more or less openly, to hold communication with the powers of darkness; and by the administration of subtile poisons, by disturbing the imagination of their victims, or by mysterious powers which have baffled the ingenuity of modern times to explain, they committed crimes and inflicted injuries, which were punished, perhaps, under an erroneous name.

The colonists of New England could by no means have been expected to be free from a belief which was general throughout Christendom; on the contrary, it was natural that they should regard witchcraft with a degree of abhorrence and indignation corresponding to those strong religious feelings, for which they were so remarkably distinguished. Their experience in America tended to strengthen the sentiments on this subject which they brought with them from Europe; for they found the belief of witchcraft

firmly rooted among the aboriginal tribes, and the practice of it, or what was so esteemed, prevalent among those people, whom, as heathens, they regarded in the light of worshippers of demons. Moreover, the persecution to which the Pilgrims had been exposed in their own country, and the sufferings which they endured in the early years of their residence here, acting upon them in co-operation with the political and ecclesiastical occurrences which marked the commencement of the seventeenth century, had imparted a gloomy, severe and romantic turn to their dispositions, which was transmitted in full strength to their children. It was the triumphant age of superstition. The imagination had been expanded by credulity, till it had reached a wild and monstrous growth. The Puritans were always prone to subject themselves to its influence, and New England was, at this time, a most fit and congenial theatre upon which to display its power. Cultivation and civilization had made but a partial encroachment upon the wilderness. Wide, deep and gloomy forests covered the hills, hung over the unfrequented roads, and frowned upon the scattered settlements. The woods were still the abode of wild beasts and wild Indians. A strongly-rooted sentiment of hostility and horror became associated in the minds of the colonists with the name of Indian. The tomahawk, scalping-knife and firebrand had laid waste the frontier, the seacoast was infested with hostile privateers, and ruthless pirates were continually prowling along the shores. It was the darkest and most desponding period in the history of this portion of our country.

The colonists, moreover, had been accustomed from an early period to "dream dreams and see visions." Sights and sounds esteemed supernatural often threw them into amazement and terror. Indian powows were seen upon the hill-tops at midnight, and demons were imagined to be flitting in the air above them; unearthly voices issued from the dark forests, and cannon were heard in the depth of the sea; strange apparitions in the sky struck all men with awe and wonder. One incident of this nature is detailed in the following narrative, which is supported by such unquestionable evidence, that there can be no doubt of its substantial truth. In January, 1646, a new ship, containing a valuable cargo, and having several distinguished persons on board as passengers, sailed from New Haven for England. The vessels which arrived in the colony during the ensuing season brought no accounts of her arrival. The pious colonists put up earnest and constant prayers that they might be favored with intelligence from the missing vessel. More than two years after, in June, 1648, as the narrative states, "a great thunder-storm arose out of the northwest; after which, the hemisphere being serene, about an hour before sunset, a ship of like dimensions with the aforesaid, with her canvass and colors abroad, although the wind was northerly, appeared in the air, coming up from the harbor's mouth, which lies southward from the town, seemingly with her sails filled under a fresh gale, holding her course north, and continuing under observation, sailing against the wind, for the space of half an hour." This phantom ship was borne along until, to the excited

imaginations of the spectators, she seemed to have approached so near that they could throw a stone on board of her. The main-topmast then disappeared; next all her masts faded away; and finally her hull fell off and vanished from the view, leaving a dull and smoke-colored cloud, which soon dissolved, and the whole atmosphere became clear. All the inhabitants were convinced that this airy vision was a precise copy and image of the missing vessel, and that it was sent to announce and describe her fate. They considered it the spectre of the lost ship, and the Rev. Mr. Davenport, of New Haven, declared in public that "God had condescended, for the quieting of their afflicted spirits, this extraordinary account of his sovereign disposal of those for whom so many fervent prayers were made continually." As these particulars are undoubted, the reader will have no difficulty in explaining this phenomenon, by referring it to a *mirage*, in which, under the influence of a peculiar state of the atmosphere, distant objects are raised above the horizon, and brought into the view of spectators far distant. It was no doubt the picture of a Dutch ship sailing towards New York.*

The first trials for witchcraft in New England occurred in 1645, when four persons charged with this crime were put to death in Massachusetts. Goffe, the regicide, in his diary, records the conviction of three others at Hartford, in Connecticut, in 1662, and remarks that after one of them was hanged, a young woman who had been bewitched was restored to

* This anecdote has been dressed up into an amusing fiction by Mr. Irving. See his tale of the "Storm Ship."

health. For more than twenty years after this, few instances occurred, and little notice has been preserved of similar prosecutions. But in 1688, a case happened in Boston which led to an execution, conducted with a degree of solemnity that made a deep impression on the minds of the people. Four of the children of one John Goodwin, a grave and steady man, were generally believed to be bewitched. The children were all remarkable for frankness of character, and had been religiously educated; the eldest was a girl of thirteen or fourteen years. She had charged a laundress with purloining some of the family linen. The mother of the laundress was a low Irish woman, of bad character, and gave the girl harsh language; soon after which the girl fell into fits, which were said to have something diabolical in them. One of her sisters and two brothers followed her example, and were tormented in the same part of their bodies at the same time, although kept in separate apartments, and ignorant of each other's complaints. One or two things excited special attention: all these phenomena happened in the daytime, yet they slept comfortably at night. They were struck dumb at the sight of the Assembly's Catechism, Cotton's Milk for Babes, and some other good books of the same stamp; but they could read without difficulty the Oxford jests, popish and Quaker books, the common prayer, and other works not in good odor among the Puritans. Sometimes they would be deaf, then dumb, then blind, and sometimes all these calamities would come upon them together. Their tongues would be drawn down their throats; their joints would appear to be dislocated;

they would make the most piteous outcries of burnings, of being cut with knives, beaten, &c., and the marks of wounds and bruises would afterwards be seen. These things excited a general wonder and alarm. The ministers of Boston and Charlestown kept a day of fasting and prayer at the troubled house, after which the youngest child made no more complaints. The others continuing to be afflicted, the magistrates interposed, and the old woman was apprehended; but upon examination she would neither confess nor deny, and appeared to be disordered in her senses. Upon the report of physicians that she was *compos mentis*, she was executed, declaring at her death that the children should not be relieved. It seems pretty evident that this woman was persuaded by the circumstances into something like a belief that she had exercised a supernatural power over them. An account of this transaction was published and circulated in England; and so generally and firmly were the wise and good of that age persuaded of the justice of the execution, that Richard Baxter, the celebrated nonconformist divine, wrote a preface to the narrative, in which he declared that any one who refused to believe it must be no better than an obdurate Sadducee. The afflicted children returned to their ordinary behavior, and ever afterward led sober and religious lives. One of them was intimately known to the historian Hutchinson, who states that she was a sober and virtuous woman, and never made any acknowledgment of fraud in this transaction.

This was sufficiently strange, and no doubt it had its effect in leading to that awful tragedy which ren-

dered New England for many months a scene of terror, madness and bloodshed. The commencement of what is called the "Salem Witchcraft," was in the family of Samuel Parris, minister of Salem village, now Danvers, in February, 1692. A quarrel had arisen between this clergyman and his people, which had grown in extent and exasperation, till it had spread animosities and malignant passions throughout the town; it finally became of such moment, that it was carried up to the General Court, and was a topic of discussion and altercation there. One writer states that the country was visited about this time with an epidemic disease, which bore some resemblance to epilepsy, but which the physicians, unable to explain or cure, readily ascribed to a supernatural cause. It appears not to have become epidemic till it was believed to be witchcraft. About the end of February, a young daughter of Parris, his niece, and two other young girls, began to make complaints similar to those which were made by the young Goodwins. The physicians, not understanding the disorder, pronounced the children bewitched. An Indian woman, who had been brought into the country from Mexico, and then lived in the house, tried some experiments of her own to discover the witch. The children, hearing this, cried out upon the poor Indian, affirmed she was pinching, pricking, and tormenting them, and fell into fits. Tituba, the Indian, acknowledged that she was a witch-finder, but denied that she was a witch herself.

It was not long before the disorder spread; and this is not difficult to be explained without resorting to any

supernatural cause. The love of notoriety, which is one of the most mischievous evils of the present day, and which we hourly behold leading multitudes of both sexes into every sort of monstrous extravagance, being a constituent part of the human character, must have existed in a greater or less degree in those times. The operation of it in this case is evident. Several private fasts were kept at the house of Parris, several public ones by the whole village, and then a general fast throughout the colony, "to seek to God to rebuke Satan." The great notice which these circumstances directed toward the children so strangely affected. together with the compassion and sympathy of the multitudes who visited them, not only tended to confirm their course of conduct, but to induce others, either through design, sympathy, or delusion, to follow their example. Accordingly, the number of the sufferers soon increased; and among them were two or three old women, and some girls of sufficient age to be credible witnesses. These charged as a witch not only Tituba, but Sarah Osborn, a melancholy, distracted old woman, and Sarah Good, a bed-ridden invalid. At length, the Indian woman, having been severely chastised by her master, confessed herself a witch, and declared that the two old women were her confederates. They were in consequence committed to prison; and Tituba was found, on examination, to have what they deemed "the devil's mark" upon her back.

About three weeks afterwards, two other women, religious and of good character, named Corey and Nurse were complained of as witches. and brought to an

examination; they were then sent to prison, although they denied the charge. Such was the infatuation, that a child of Sarah Good, not more than four or five years old, was also committed as a witch, being accused of biting some of the afflicted, who showed the print of small teeth on their arms. Grown people now began to show a desire to participate in the notoriety enjoyed by the afflicted children; and the wife of Thomas Putnam complained of Nurse, as tormenting her. On the third of April, Mr. Parris, who took up the matter with the most fiery zeal, preached a sermon from the text, "Have I not chosen you twelve, and one of you is a devil?" At these words, Sarah Cloyse, supposing the allusion to be made to Nurse, who was her sister, left the meeting; she was therefore complained of as a witch, examined, and committed. Elizabeth Procter was accused about the same time. Her husband accompanied her to the examination; for this he was charged with witchcraft, and subsequently lost his life.

The matter had now acquired a fearful interest. Danforth, the deputy governor, and five other magistrates, came to Salem. It was a great day; several ministers were present. Parris officiated, and it is plain, by his own record, that he elicited and brought forward every accusation in his power. This man was evidently not wholly guided by a blind zeal for the performance of what he considered his duty, but also actuated by a vindictive spirit against some of the individuals with whom he had quarrelled.

He may have been to some extent self-duped; for a man whose mind is ill regulated, easily persuades

himself that his enemies are allies of the devil. There are few, perhaps, who ever make so gross a display of their prejudices; yet there are thousands, even at the present day, who, in condemning those they hate, manifest the same kind of hallucination as that which affected this great mover in the delusion at Salem. The credulity of the magistrates, who had assembled for the trial of the accused, passed all bounds; and their singular method of making the investigations, led to the most deplorable results. Instead of proceeding with caution and impartiality, entertaining a prudent distrust of the witnesses, sifting their testimony, and putting them upon cross-examination, they made use of leading questions, put words into their mouths, and suffered others to do the same. The following is a specimen of the proceedings at a trial involving questions of life and death:

Q. John, who hurt you?

A. Goody Procter first, and then Goody Cloyse.

Q. What did she do to you?

A. She brought the book to me.

Q. John, tell the truth; who hurts you? have you been hurt?

A. The first was a gentlewoman I saw.

Q. But who hurt you next?

A. Goody Procter. She choked me and brought the book.

Q. Where did she take hold of you?

A. Upon my throat to stop my breath.

Q. What did this Goody Cloyse do?

A. She pinched me till the blood came.

[*Here one of the afflicted fell into a fit.*]

Q. Abigail Williams! Did you see a company at Mr. Parris' house eat and drink?

A. Yes, sir; that was their sacrament.

Q. How many were there?

A. About forty; and Goody Cloyse and Goody Good were their deacons.

Q. What was it?

A. They said it was our blood, and they had it twice that day.

Q. Mary Walcot—have you seen a white man?

A. Yes, sir, a great many times.

Q. What sort of a man was he?

A. A fine, grave man; and when he came, he made all the witches to tremble. [Abigail Williams confirmed the same, and said they had such a sight at Deacon Ingersoll's.]

Q. Who was at Deacon Ingersoll's then?

A. Goody Cloyse, Goody Corey, Goody Nurse and Goody Good. [Then Sarah Cloyse asked for water and "sat down as one seized with a dying fainting fit." Several of the afflicted fell into fits, and some of them cried out, "Oh! her spirit is gone to prison to her sister Nurse."]

Q. What do you say, Goody Procter, to these things?

A. I take God to be my witness that I know nothing of it, no more than the child unborn.

During the examination of Elizabeth Procter, "Abigail Williams and Ann Putnam both made offer to strike at said Procter: but when Abigail's hand came near, it opened, whereas it was made up into a fist before, and came down exceeding lightly as it

drew near to said Procter, and at length, with open, extended fingers, touched Procter's hood very lightly. Immediately Abigail cried out, 'her fingers! her fingers! her fingers burned!' and Ann Putnam took on most grievously, of her head, and sunk down."

No wonder, as Hutchinson remarks, the whole country was thrown into consternation, when persons of sober lives and unblemished characters were committed to prison upon evidence like this. Nobody was safe. The most effectual way to prevent an accusation was to become an accuser: accordingly, the number of afflicted increased every day, and the number of accused in proportion, who in general persisted in declaring their innocence, but being strongly urged to give glory to God by confession, and it being represented to them, by their friends, that this was the only way to save their lives, some were brought to own their guilt. The confessions multiplied the witches: new companions were always mentioned, who were immediately sent for and examined. A monstrous doctrine now obtained currency; "the gallows was to be set up, not for those who professed themselves witches, but for those who rebuked the delusion:" not so much for the guilty as for the unbelieving. The whole community was now in a state of terror and alarm, which it is impossible adequately to describe.

Examinations and commitments were of daily occurrence. The purest life, the strictest integrity, the most solemn asseverations of innocence, were of no avail: husband was torn from wife, parents from children, brother from sister; in some cases the un-

happy victims saw in their accusers their nearest and dearest friends, sometimes even a wife, or a daughter, who took these steps with the hope of saving themselves. The jails were crowded, and more than a hundred women, most of them of fair characters and of the most reputable families in Salem, Beverly, Andover, Billerica and other towns, were apprehended and committed to prison.

At the trial of Bridget Bishop, John Cook testified that "about five or six years before, one morning about sunrise, he was in his chamber, and was assaulted by the shape of the prisoner, who looked on him, grinned at him, and very much hurt him with a blow on the side of the head; and that on the same day about noon, the same shape walked into the room where he was, and an apple strangely flew out of his hand into the lap of his mother." "Samuel Gray testified that about fourteen years before, he waked in the night, and saw the room full of light, and presently discovered a woman between the cradle and the bedside, who looked upon him. He rose, and she vanished, though he found all the doors fast. Looking out at the entry door, he saw the same woman again, and said, 'In God's name, what do you come for?' He went to bed, and had the same woman again assaulting him. The child in the cradle gave a great screech, and the phantom disappeared. It was long before the child could be quieted, and, although it was a very likely, thriving child, yet from this time it pined away and died, in a sad condition. He knew not Bishop, but when he saw her, after this, he was sure that the above was her spectre." John Bly and

his wife testified that he bought a swine of the prisoner's husband, and paid the price to a creditor of his. The prisoner, being angry at being thus prevented from fingering the money, quarrelled with Bly, after which the animal was taken with strange fits, jumping and knocking its head against the fence. Whereupon a neighbor said she believed the creature was "overlooked," and sundry other circumstances concurred which made the deponents believe that Bishop had bewitched the animal.

John Lander testified that upon some little controversy with Bishop about her fowls, going well to bed, he awaked in the night by moonlight, and clearly saw the likeness of this woman grievously oppressing him. After this, being at home on a Lord's day, with the doors shut about him, he saw a black pig approach him: he attempted to give it a kick, on which it vanished away. Immediately after, sitting down, he saw a black thing jump in at the window, and come and stand before him. The body was like that of a monkey, the feet like a cock's, and the face much like a man's. He being so extremely affrighted that he could not speak, this monster addressed him thus: "I am a messenger sent unto you, for I understand that you are in some trouble of mind, and if you will be ruled by me, you shall want for nothing in this world." Whereupon he endeavored to clap his hands upon it, but could feel no substance, and it jumped out of the window again, but immediately came in at the porch, though the doors were shut, and said, "You had better take my counsel." He then struck at it with a stick, but hit only the

groundsel, and broke the stick. The arm with which he struck was presently disabled, and the spectre vanished away. He then went out the back door, and spied this Bishop in her orchard, but he had not power to advance one step toward her. He returned into his house, and was again accosted by the monster, which was now going to fly at him; but he cried out, "The whole armor of God be between me and you!" on which the goblin sprang back and flew over the apple tree, shaking down many apples, and flinging dirt against the deponent, who was struck dumb, and so remained for three days. Other persons testified to many supernatural things, in which the prisoner had borne a part; and the members of the court themselves appear to have been witnesses against her, for we are positively informed that as she was passing, attended by a guard, near the great meeting-house of Salem, she gave a look toward the house, and immediately a demon, invisibly entering the meeting-house, tore down a part of it. Thus the monstrous fictions given as evidence, were mixed up with the most frivolous trifles. One man testified to the witchcraft of another, because, having received money from him, presently it was gone. The learned court never thought of inquiring whether this wiseacre had not a hole in his pocket.

The trial of George Burroughs affords one of the clearest indications that individual malignity had a share in these horrible persecutions. The accused was a man of ability and education, and had formerly been a minister in Salem village. There was a quarrel between him and Parris, the original instigator of the delusion, and moreover Burroughs openly denied

the existence of witchcraft. There can be no doubt that these circumstances had a predominant influence in procuring his condemnation. The evidence against him was of a very loose and general nature, consisting, in a great measure, of things alleged to have been said or done by his shape or apparition; and attempts were made in this way to prove that he had murdered two wives and other persons. It was considered strong proof of witchcraft, that, being a small man, he possessed such strength as to be able to lift a barrel of molasses, and to hold a musket of seven feet barrel at arm's length. On his trial, he utterly denied that there was any truth in the popular notions of witchcraft, which alone was sufficient to condemn him. At his execution, Cotton Mather attended on horseback, and viewed the spectacle with great exultation. Many of the spectators were affected to tears, and it seemed as if they would hinder the execution; but Mather addressed the crowd, abused the victim, and asserted that the devil had often been transformed into an angel of light. Twenty others shared the fate of Burroughs; a hundred and fifty more were in prison awaiting trial; two hundred more were under accusation; and above a hundred and fifty had been tortured or terrified into confession.

Where was this to end? This question seems at last to have suggested itself to reflecting persons as the frenzy mounted to its utmost height, and the evil wrought its own cure by the extravagant length to which it had run. A madness so wild could not but spend itself in a short time. After raging for fifteen months, these atrocities began to appear in their true

light, and the delusion abated. The minds of men were sobered down to cool reason, the spell was broken, and witchcraft was no more. People gazed at each other in astonishment, as if they had just waked from a horrible nightmare; universal shame and remorse succeeded to this storm of fanaticism. Thus terminated a scene of epidemic madness and delusion, which excited the astonishment of the civilized world, and exhibited a fearful picture of the weakness of human nature.

Most of the actors in this terrible drama atoned by the bitterest remorse and the most contrite repentance for their deplorable delusion. Parris, the minister, was driven from among his people; the humblest confession could not save him. Noyes, a minister of Salem, another chief agent, but less guilty than Parris, made a full and sincere confession, asked pardon of his people, and was forgiven. Sewall, one of the judges, made a confession of his error in the face of a public congregation. Cotton Mather, one of the most culpable of all the abettors of this persecution, was one of the last to repent, if indeed he ever repented. This selfish and intolerant bigot resisted all the endeavors of wiser men to dispel the delusion, and declared his determination to "box it about among his neighbors till it came he knew not where at last." He attempted to get up a case of witchcraft in his own parish; but the people of Boston were saved from the evils which his fanaticism might have induced, by the good sense and courage of several citizens of the town, among whom was a merchant named Robert Calef, who published a volume, exposing the imposture and wickedness of the whole business.

One of the most unaccountable of the circumstances attending these extraordinary events, is the fact that none of the witnesses who had so unscrupulously sworn away the lives of innocent persons were ever brought to punishment. Perhaps this arose from the feeling that the past could not be repaired, that the dead were beyond recall, and none wished to awaken a recollection of such horrors. Hutchinson affirms that for many years afterward, the opinion maintained its ground that there was something preternatural in this strange affair, and that an epidemic disorder, inexplicable in its nature, really affected both the bodies and imagination of the afflicted persons. This is, perhaps, as charitable and rational a method as we can devise for solving this strange mystery.